MARVEL COMICS
DEC
#3
HEROES REBORN
THE RETURN
PART 3 OF 4
HEROES & VILLAINS OF BOTH WORLDS UNITE!
BUT IS IT TOO LATE?!
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HEROES REBORN

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THE RETURN PART 3 OF 4

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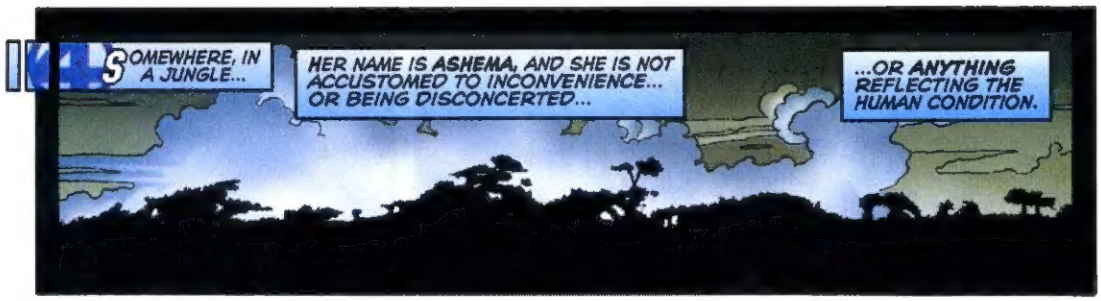
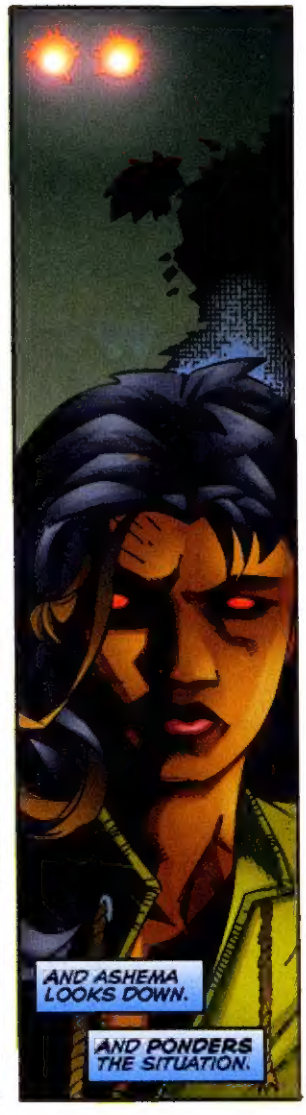

SOMEWHERE, IN A JUNGLE...
HER NAME IS ASHEMA, AND SHE IS NOT ACCUSTOMED TO INCONVENIENCE... OR BEING DISCONCERTED...
...OR ANYTHING REFLECTING THE HUMAN CONDITION.

THE CHILD, FRANKLIN -- WHY IS HE MAKING SUCH A FUSS? WHY CAN HE NOT SIMPLY DECIDE WHICH IS TO BE OBLITERATED: HIS OWN WORLD, OR THE SPHERE WHICH HE CREATED?
SHE HAS SEEN LIFE IN BILLIONS OF DIFFERENT FORMS THROUGHOUT THE COSMOS. WHY DO THESE LITTLE EARTH PEOPLE SEEM COMPLETELY UNABLE TO DEAL WITH IT? WHY IS FRANKLIN BEING SUCH A NUISANCE?

AT LEAST HE STOPPED CRYING. HE WAS RUNNING, SHOUTING JUST UP AHEAD, AND THEN CEASED.
PERHAPS HE'S COME TO HIS SENSES. PERHAPS...

HMMF. A CLIFF.
FRANKLIN?
FRANKLIN?

CLEARLY HE BOLTED, UNSEEING, OFF THE EDGE OF THE PRECIPICE, TAKING A FALL OF AT LEAST A HUNDRED FEET. HE IS NOT MOVING. BARELY BREATHING.


AND ASHEMA LOOKS DOWN.
AND PONDERS THE SITUATION.

REED RICHARDS' LAB IN THE HQ OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR, NEW YORK CITY...
LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT, REED. YOU'RE SAYING YOU'VE KNOWN ALL ALONG THAT YOUR OLD PAL, TONY STARK, IS IRON MAN...
... THAT SOME "GHOST BOY" CLAIMS HE'S YOUR SON AND THAT HE CREATED THE WORLD...
... SOME GIANT FIREBALLS ARE APPROACHING THE EARTH ON A COLLISION COURSE...
... AND THAT YOU THINK BRINGING VON DOOM INTO THE LOOP WILL HELP MATTERS?
HE AIDED US AGAINST GALACTUS, TONY. BESIDES, IT'S HIS PLANET, TOO. ALL WE NEED IS BRUCE AND WE'LL HAVE THE ATOMIC KNIGHTS REUNITED, WHICH MAY BE WHAT WE NEED.
AS FOR VERIFYING THE BOY'S CLAIMS, THAT'S WHERE YOU COME IN.
WELL, I BROUGHT ROCK SAMPLES FROM A MILE BENEATH THE EARTH'S SURFACE. BUT CARBON DATING INDICATES NOTHING ABNORMAL.
THEY WOULDN'T. THEY'RE WITHIN OUR SPHERE. THERE'S CONSISTENCY.
BUT OUR EXPERIENCES IN THE NEGATIVE ZONE SUGGEST THAT THE READINGS WE GET WITHIN THAT PLANE OF REALITY MIGHT --

REED/ REED, THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH FRANKLIN/ I... I JUST KNOW IT/
"FRANKLIN." THAT WOULD BE THE GHOST BOY.
HE'S OUR SON, NOT A GHOST/ AND WE HAVE TO HELP HIM/
AND WE WILL, SUSAN. BUT IF WE DIDN'T INVESTIGATE WHAT HE WAS WARNING US OF --
FINE, RUN YOUR TESTS. IRON MAN, GET GOING. DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO --
BZZT BZZT
UH OH.
THIS DOES NOT LOOK GOOD.
WHAT IS IT, REED?
THE FIREBALLS I'M TRACKING HAVE PICKED UP SPEED. AT THIS POINT, I'D GAUGE THEIR ARRIVAL IN FOUR DAYS... PERHAPS SOONER.
SWELL... OKAY, REED, AS WE DISCUSSED... YOU MONITOR FROM HERE, AND I'LL TAKE THE ROCKS INTO THE NEGATIVE ZONE AND RUN THE TESTS. LET'S DO IT.
VON DOOM AND BRUCE BANNER, POTENTIAL ALLIES AGAIN.
THIS THING JUST GETS WILDER AND WILDER.

STAN LEE PRESENTS:

HEROES REBORN

THE RETURN PART 3

STUPID FAKE HULK THINKS HE CAN *FOOL* HULK! BUT *NO ONE* FOOLS HULK!

GUYS, *WAIT! HOLD* IT/ THIS WON'T ACCOMPLISH *ANYTHING!*

BANNER! I'D RECOGNIZE YOU... *ANYWHERE!*

BEEN... *LOOKING* FOR YOU... AND NOW THAT I'VE *FOUND* YOU...

...I'LL *SMASH* YOU!

THIRD DIMENSION

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GOOD LORD... I'M STANDING BETWEEN TWO HULKS...
...WHAT AM I, NUTS?!

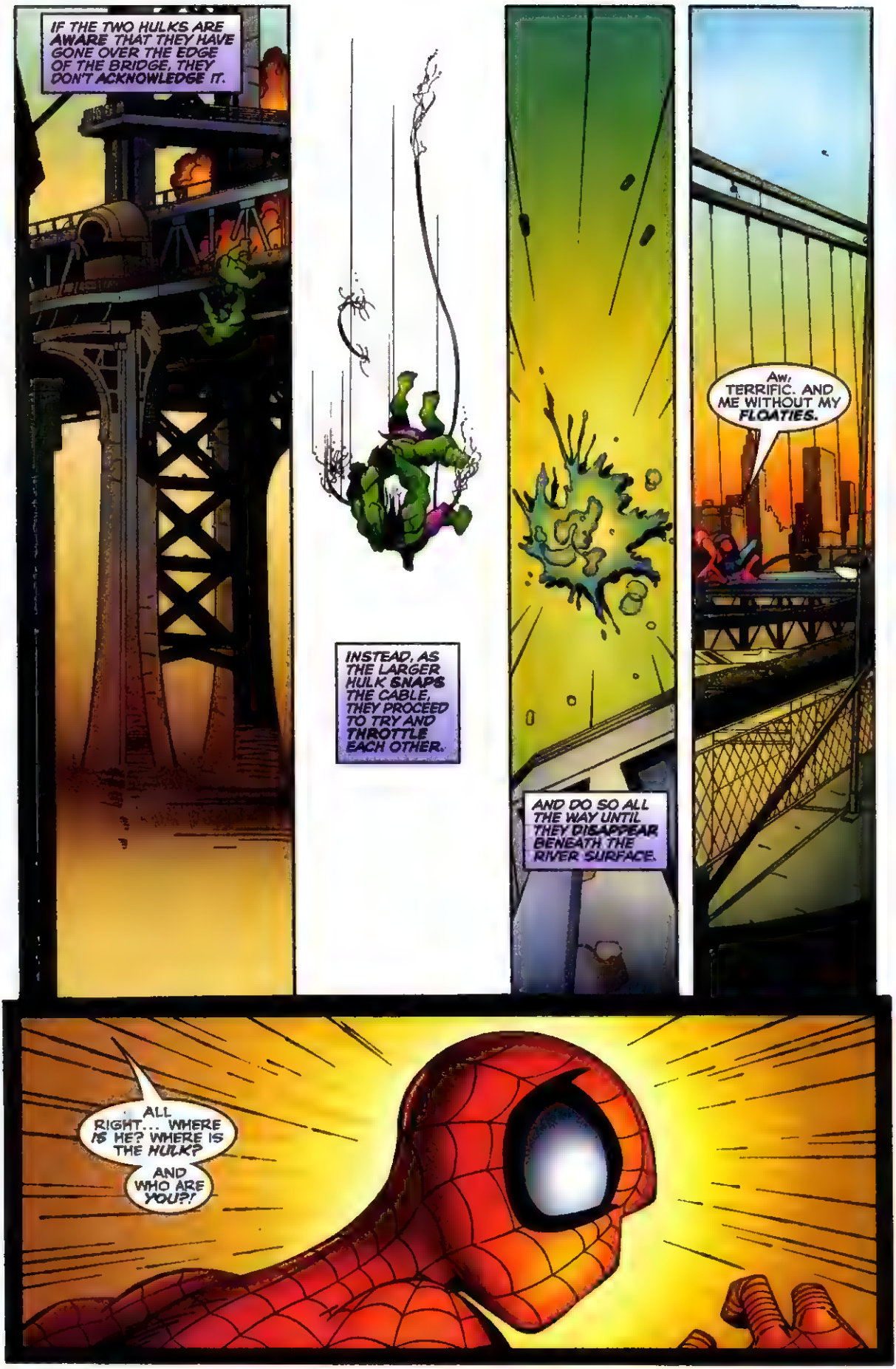
CRIPES, HOW DID WE WIND UP ON THE GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE?!
AND THE RAIN... THE RAIN'S STOPPED! INSTEAD IT'S SO... SO HOT THAT IT'S ALMOST SUFFOCATING!
AND WHERE DID THAT SECOND HULK COME FROM? OR MAYBE THE BETTER QUESTION IS...

...WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

HA! FAKE HULK IS AS WEAK AS ALL THE OTHERS!

BECAUSE HULK IS THE STRONGEST ONE THERE IS!
YOU... THIS IS...
...THIS IS ALL... YOUR FAULT...
...YOU LEFT ME... BETRAYED ME...
THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!
YOU THINK... BECAUSE YOU'RE BANNER... YOU'RE THE REAL HULK..?
MAYBE I'D BETTER GET TO A SAFE DISTANCE...
...LIKE PERU.

EVER SINCE LOSING BANNER... I'VE BEEN SEARCHING... FOR COMPLETION...
...SEARCHING FOR MORE THAN I WAS... LIKE A CRIPPLE... NEEDING A CRUTCH...
...AND NOW THAT I'VE FOUND YOU... AND SEEN YOU... AND REMEMBER WHAT IT WAS LIKE... HAVING YOU IN MY HEAD...
...I KNOW NOW...
...YOU'RE OUT OF MY MIND! AND I LIKE IT THAT WAY!


IF THE TWO HULKS ARE AWARE THAT THEY HAVE GONE OVER THE EDGE OF THE BRIDGE, THEY DON'T ACKNOWLEDGE IT.
INSTEAD, AS THE LARGER HULK SNAPS THE CABLE, THEY PROCEED TO TRY AND THROTTLE EACH OTHER.
AND DO SO ALL THE WAY UNTIL THEY DISAPPEAR BENEATH THE RIVER SURFACE.
AW, TERRIFIC. AND ME WITHOUT MY FLOATIES.
ALL RIGHT... WHERE IS HE? WHERE IS THE HULK?
AND WHO ARE YOU?!

Oh... MY GOD!
YOU'RE ALIVE!

HEAR THAT? WE'RE ALIVE.
TECHNICALLY, YES, BUT NOT ALL OF US.

BACK IN THE JUNGLE...
WITH ALL THE WISDOM OF THE CELESTIALS, WE STILL NEVER EXPECTED SUCH AN ODD ENDING TO THE EXPERIMENT.
VARIED AND UNEXPECTED ARE THE PATHS OF DISCOVERY.
YOU WILL BE AT PEACE FRANKLIN. PASS ON.
WHAT?
THE END HAS COME UPON HIM... THE DEATH RATTLE IN HIS THROAT... AND SHE REACHES OUT... REACHES WITH CELESTIAL ABILITY...
...AND CATCHES THE EPHEMERAL THING CALLED THE HUMAN SOUL, AS SHE ATTEMPTS TO REJOIN IT TO HIS BODY WITH AN INSTINCT SHE DIDN'T KNOW SHE POSSESSED.
AND IN TOUCHING HIS SOUL...

...SHE TOUCHES THE SOUL OF EVERYONE IN THE WORLD.
FOR THIS WORLD ORIGINATED WITH FRANKLIN. BY BONDING WITH HIS SOUL, HE CONNECTS WITH EVERY LIVING CREATURE ON THE FACE OF THIS EARTH.
SUCH A CRASH COURSE IN HUMANITY IS HUMBLING, NUMBING... EVEN FOR A CELESTIAL IN HUMAN FORM.
FOR ASHEMA, WHO HAS SPENT ETERNITY BEING ABOVE IT ALL, HAS SUDDENLY FOUND HERSELF OVER HER HEAD IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE. AS IF SHE WERE REMEMBERING THINGS SHE DID NOT KNOW SHE'D FORGOTTEN.

AH...
...A...
ASHEMA..?
CAN... CAN I GO... TO MY MOM AND DAD NOW?
ARE YOU... CRYING?

MEANWHILE, IN NEW YORK...
...THE TWO HULKS STRUGGLE FURIOUSLY, TRYING TO CHOKE THE LIFE FROM ONE ANOTHER... TO, BASICALLY, DROWN EACH OTHER.
IT IS VERY LIKELY THAT BOTH WILL DIE...
...WERE THEY PROVIDED THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEE MATTERS TO THEIR NATURAL CONCLUSION.
BUT A NEURAL DAMPENER AND GAMMA INHIBITOR...
...ARRANGES OTHERWISE.

IT'S... IT'S NOT POSSIBLE.
WHAT HAPPENED, IRON MAN? WHAT DID THE READINGS IN THE ZONE SAY?
ACCORDING TO THESE... THIS SAMPLE FROM OUR SUBSTRATA, FROM OUR WORLD...
...IS LESS THAN A YEAR OLD.
GOD IN HEAVEN.
WE'VE GOT TO FIND FRANKLIN. HE'S THE ONLY ANSWER. AND HE SAID SOMETHING WAS COMING... THE CELESTIALS... AND A DECISION HAD TO BE MADE ABOUT EARTH LIVING OR DYING...
BZZLT BZZLT
AS IF WE NEEDED SOMETHING ELSE TO EXACERBATE OUR SITUATION: THE FIRE-BALLS HAVE PICKED UP SPEED. E.T.A. TWENTY-EIGHT HOURS.
SUSAN IS RIGHT. WE HAVE TO FIND THE BOY, IMMEDIATELY...
DAD..? MOMMY..?
MOMMY!

ACROSS TOWN...
HEY, BUG-BOY! DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH... THAT?!
IT'S "SPIDER-MAN," AND NO! I WAS HOPING YOU KNEW WHAT IT WAS!
I'M STILL TRYING TO ADJUST TO THE FACT THAT YOU GUYS ARE STILL SUCKING AIR!
HOLY MOTHER OF --!
WELL, DEAL WITH IT AND LET'S MOVE ON.
INCREDIBLE. IT JUST... JUST ROSE OUT OF THE RIVER LIKE...
BANNER! IT'S GOT BANNER IN SOME SORT OF FORCE BUBBLE... AND THAT OTHER HULK, TOO!

ATTENTION, THOSE OF YOU IN PURSUIT OF THIS VESSEL... AND REED RICHARDS, WHO I ASSUME IS MONITORING THIS BROADCAST, I PERCEIVE YOU HAVE SOME DIFFICULTIES TO BE ATTENDED TO.
RICHARDS HAS PROPOSED A REUNION OF OUR FORMER "CLIQUE," AND I HAVE TAKEN THE LIBERTY OF RETRIEVING BANNER...

...FOR THAT VERY PURPOSE.

IN CASE YOU ARE AT ALL INTERESTED, THIS "OTHER HULK" APPEARS TO BE "LEAKING" SOME SORT OF TRANSDIMENSIONAL ENERGY. MY FORCE DAMPENING BUBBLE HAS MANAGED TO KEEP IT IN CHECK SO THAT IT HAS NO HARMFUL EFFECT UPON THIS VESSEL.
IN THE EVENT THAT YOU ANTICIPATE AN ATTEMPT AT FLEEING ON MY PART...
...I WILL INFORM YOU THAT I AM HEADING STRAIGHTAWAY TO THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR... THERE TO MEET WITH THE CLOSEST THAT I HAVE TO A PEER ON THIS PLANET. I SHALL NOT DEVIATE FROM THAT COURSE.
YOU HAVE THE WORD... OF DOCTOR DOOM.

THE STREETS OF MANHATTAN...
...WHERE THE SWELTERING HEAT... AND THE OVERALL SENSE OF IMPENDING DOOM...
...HAS CAUSED SOME TO GIVE FREE REIN TO THEIR GREED.
BUT AS THERE ARE SOME WHO FACE ARMAGEDDON WITH DARKNESS IN THEIR SOULS...
...THERE ARE OTHERS...
...WHO, TO THE END... FIGHT FOR THE LIGHT.
FALCON, I SURE WISH I KNEW WHERE CAP WAS!
YOU AND ME BOTH, BUCKY. YOU AND ME --
HOLY --!
IN THE SKY --! THOSE... THOSE FIREBALLS! AND THERE'S... THERE'S SOMETHING... FORMING AROUND THEM --! IT... I DON'T...

REED'S LAB...
YOU JUST HAPPENED TO HAVE A SPACE SHIP HANDY, DOOM?
THE WORLD NEARLY MET ITS END AT THE HANDS OF GALACTUS, IRON MAN. I WOULD BE MOST FOOLISH NOT TO HAVE AN ESCAPE VESSEL HANDY SHOULD SUCH A SCENARIO RECUR. ABOVE ALL, DOOM MUST SURVIVE.
AND WHEN RICHARDS APPRISED ME OF THE SITUATION WE FACE... I FELT IT MIGHT BE A USEFUL DEVICE TO HAVE CLOSE AT HAND, PRESUMING YOU ONCE AGAIN NEED MY AID.
SINCE BANNER WAS REQUIRED, I TERMINATED THAT IMBROGLIO AS WELL.
SO, RICHARDS... YOU HAVE THE FLOOR. PERHAPS YOU'D BEST PROCEED.
PEOPLE, THE FOLLOWING EVIDENCE CANNOT BE IGNORED: THE AGE OF OUR WORLD, THE APPROACHING FIREBALLS -- THIS BOY'S -- I MEAN, MY "SON'S" STORY OF ANOTHER WORLD, VERIFIED BY THIS OTHER HULK AND "SPIDER-MAN..."
I KNOW IT SOUNDS INSANE, BUT --
IT'S WAY BEYOND INSANE, RICHARDS. NEXT STOP'S THE TWILIGHT ZONE.
WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST WE DO NEXT? PILE INTO DOOM'S SHIP AND HEAD BACK THERE?
ACTUALLY, HAWKEYE, I THINK THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT HE'S GOING TO PROPOSE.

YOU HAVE NO CHOICE.
AND WHO'S THIS AGAIN?
BE QUIET.
THE CELESTIALS HAVE GIVEN FRANKLIN AN ULTIMATUM, TO DETERMINE WHICH WORLD LIVES AND DIES. AND FRANKLIN... YOU'VE DECIDED, HAVEN'T YOU?
I'M... I'M SORRY, MA. I... CAN'T LET THE OTHER ONE GET BLOWED UP.
I MADE THIS ONE, AND I WISH I COULDA SAVED IT, BUT I DUNNO HOW AND I GOTTA CHOOSE...
THERE MUST BE A WAY TO SAVE BOTH. THERE IS, ISN'T THERE? SOMETHING YOU'RE NOT SAYING...
NO. AND YOUR ONLY HOPE IS ESCAPE. ALL OF YOU, TOGETHER. FOR YOUR TIME IS RUNNING OUT. THOSE "FIREBALLS" ARE MORE THAN THEY APPEAR --
WAIT... FROM THE STREETS BELOW... DO YOU HEAR IT...?
SCREAMING... PANIC. WHAT'S GOING ON?
Oh... MY LORD...

"I ASSUME YOU ARE CONVINCED?"